DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 227 CS 212 864

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TITLE The Impact of Persona on the Success of Written Arguments.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Authors; College Freshmen; Drug Legislation; Essays; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; Questionnaires; *Reader Text Relationship; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Drugs; Purpose (Composition); Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

In a study, 52 first-year college students were asked to complete questionnaires about their attitudes about legalizing drugs. The students were to offer persona judgments about hypothetical authors arguing for and against legalization. Next, the participants were assigned to read and evaluate essays for and against legalization, and then were to offer persona judgments of the essay writers. Slightly over half of participants held anti-legalization attitudes. Mean ratings of argumentative essays were slightly but not significantly higher for the essay that argued against legalization. Overall, the hypothetical "pro" author was not liked nearly as much as the hypothetical "con" author. Interestingly, readers who supported legalization liked the "con" author as much as the "pro" author. In general, readers liked the pro-legalization essay better than they thought they would, and there was no significant difference in liking for the two essay authors among pro-legalization students. Correlations basically supported the notion that attitude, persona judgments, and argument evaluations are all related in complex ways, with attitude being an especially strong factor. Results highlight the difficulty of determining how individual readers will react to broad, editorial-style arguments addressed to a large portion of the population. (Three figures and four tables are included.) (SG)

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The Impact of Persona on the Success of Written Arguments

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Paper Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication

March, 1991
Boston, MA

CS212864

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Introduction

This project concerns a very familiar phenomenon. When people read a text, they often form impressions of the writer's personality. Thus, while reading, they may form an impression of the writer as friendly, arrogant, or aggressive. Writing teachers have long recognized that being aware of the personality impressions readers are likely to form from one's text is an important ability for one to develop. For example, Odell (1981, p. 102) suggests that the following conditions are essential for competent writing:

(1) Writers must know what sort of voice or personality they wish to convey, and they must be clear about their relation to their audience. (2) Writers must also have a good sense of the purpose they wish to accomplish in their writing. (3) An awareness of this complex relationship between voice, audience, and purpose must govern writers' choices of language, sentence structure, and content. (p. 102)

Writers who fail to perceive the sorts of personality traits their texts project to readers will have serious difficulty in assessing whether or not they have made appropriate choices of language, sentence structure, and content.

The persona study has proceeded in three phases. The first phase demonstrated that personality traits which college admissions counselors inferred from admissions essays influenced the counselors' admissions judgments. In other words, the counselors used the essays to build judgments of what kind of person the writer was, and these judgments affected the counselors' decisions on whether or not to admit the writer to the college. The second phase demonstrated that some textual features could be manipulated in these essays in order to influence the personality traits which readers inferred in the writer.

Studying persona judgments in the context of application essays seemed rather natural--the whole point of these essays, according to the admissions officers who read them, is to go beyond a list of achievements and awards and give the reader a sense of what kind or person you are. When you're writing an admissions essay, the persona that comes across is, in a sense, the argument that you're making.

The purpose of the third phase of the persona study, though, is to see what kind of role persona judgments play in other kinds of persuasive situations. Specifically, what kind of role do persona judgments play in getting readers to accept an argument on a controversial

issue? And conversely, how do readers make persona judgments about writers when they read these kinds of arguments? It is this phase of the research that I will be discussing today.

Procedure

When I speak of controversial issues, I'm thinking of standard moral/political issues, such as gun control, abortion, affirmative action, etc., that you'll find essays on in any freshman argumentation reader. For a variety of reasons, I decided to work with the topic of drug legalization. I began by reading everything I could find on the subject, from articles in Redbook and Reader's Digest, to columns in Time and Newsweek, to scholarly reports and books written by respected ethicists, trying to get a sense of what kinds of arguments were being applied to the issue from all sides. I finally took a bunch of arguments that I found in a variety of sources and used them to write my own pair of editorial-style essays--one advocating the legalization of drugs and one opposing legalization.

I had 52 first-year college students work through the following activities:

1. Fill out a questionnaire detailing their attitudes on the issue of legalizing drugs.
2. Offer persona judgments about hypothetical authors arguing for and against legalization.
3. Read and evaluate the argumentative essays that I wrote advocating and opposing the legalization of drugs.
4. Offer persona judgments of the authors of the two essays they had just read.

Now I'll talk about each measure in a little more detail.

First, the attitude questionnaire. It didn't seem very revealing to just ask people if they thought drugs should be legalized or not. For instance, one person might feel that only some drugs, such as marijuana, should be legalized, but drugs like heroin should not be. Someone else might feel that heroin should be legalized, but only if it is tightly controlled. And a third person might think that all drugs should be legalized and completely uncontrolled. Technically, all of these people would be "pro" legalization, but to simply describe them as such would be misleading.

To try to capture a little bit of this subtlety, I constructed a questionnaire of 8 statements pertaining to the issue of drug legalization. The students were asked to read the 8

statements and to rate each statement on a 5-point scale (see Figure 1), from "I strongly disagree with this statement" to "I strongly agree with this statement."

strongly disagree	disagree	neither agree nor disagree	agree	strongly agree

"All drugs should be legalized and uncontrolled, so that whoever wants to can buy or sell them."

"Drugs should be legalized but controlled, the way alcohol is now."

"None of the drugs which are currently illegal should be legalized."

"Not only should illegal drugs remain illegal, but we should consider banning drugs which are currently legal, such as alcohol and tobacco."

Figure 1: Rating scale and sample statements from attitude questionnaire.

Taking their responses to each of the statements into account, I was able to come up with a single score, ranging from 1 to 8, for each student. A **one** meant that the student agreed **only** with the statement, "Not only should illegal drugs remain illegal, but we should consider banning drugs which are currently legal, such as alcohol and tobacco." An **eight** meant that the student agreed **only** with the statement, "All drugs should be legalized and uncontrolled, so that whoever wants to can buy or sell them." A score in the middle of the scale usually meant that the student found a range of the statements acceptable, some on both sides of the middle point. So the attitude scale ranged from 1 to 8, with 4.5 being the midpoint. A student who scored higher than 5 was considered to be "For" legalization. A student who scored lower than 4 was considered to be "Against" legalization. Those who scored between 4 and 5, I considered to be in the middle--not feeling very strongly either way.

The second questionnaire gave the students a list of persona traits and asked them the question, "What kind of person would you expect to argue **for** the legalization of drugs?," and "What kind of person would you expect to argue **against** the legalization of drugs?,"

and asked them to circle all of the personality traits that they felt would apply in each case. (See Figure 2.) This is what I'm calling their reactions to "hypothetical" authors.

Modest	Pessimistic
Unlikable	Mature
Likable	Phony/Insincere
Socially adept	Dull
Optimistic	Immature
Confident/Secure	Lazy
Arrogant	Interesting/Creative
Socially awkward	Intelligent
Not intelligent	Honest/Sincere
Caring/Sensitive	Combative/Argumentative
Insecure	Sociable/Extrovert
Loner/Introvert	Hard-working
Easy-going	Uncaring/Insensitive

Figure 2: Traits from Persona questionnaire.

Third, the students were asked to read and evaluate the two essays that I had written on the issue of legalizing drugs. After reading both of the essays, they were asked to evaluate each essay holistically, using a 5-point scale, from very weak to very strong. They were asked to rate the arguments in the essays--how convincing were the arguments. Beyond that, they were given no further instruction in what criteria to use.

Finally, the students were given the list of personality traits again. This time, though, they were asked, "How would you describe the personality of the writer of the essay which advocated legalizing drugs?" and "How would you describe the personality of the writer of the essay which argued against legalizing drugs?" They were again asked to circle all of the personality traits that they felt would apply to each author.

Results

I'm going to talk about the results out of order. First, I'll talk about the attitude questionnaire, then the essay ratings, and then the two persona ratings together.

1. Attitude Questionnaire--A little over half of the students scored below a 4 on the attitude questionnaire, putting them in the "Against Legalization" column. (See Table 1.) Only 7

students scored above 5, putting them in the "For Legalization" column. 18 students scored neutral--between 4 and 5. These neutral students were not included in any of the other analyses I'm going to be showing you, though I did include them in some correlations and regressions that I'm only going to mention. The mean rating of all of the students was 3.95 on the scale of 1 to 8, just below the cutoff.

	Against (1.00-4.00)	Neutral (4.01-5.00)	For (5.01-8.00)	Total
# Students	27	18	7	52
	(52%)	(35%)	(13%)	(100%)

Table 1: Results from the attitude questionnaire.

2. Essay Ratings--Table 2 shows the students' holistic ratings of the two argumentative essays that they read. When you take all of the students into account (see the bottom row of Table 2), there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two essays, though the mean of the essay arguing *against* legalization was a little higher than the mean of the essay that argued *for* legalization. Looking at the top two rows of the table, we can see that the readers who were for legalization liked the pro-legalization essay better and those readers who were against legalization liked the anti-legalization essay better. [*Note: An ANOVA found that the interaction between essay and student categories was significant at .001, but the small cell sizes makes ANOVA results suspect.]

	Essay For	Essay Against
Students For	3.67	2.75
Students Against	2.90	4.19
All Students	3.12	3.79

Table 2: Participants' ratings of the two argumentative essays.

3. Persona Ratings--I wanted to rate the individual personality traits as "positive" traits and as "negative" traits, hoping in this way to avoid having to score each trait independently in order to find out anything. So, at the end of the session, I asked each of the students to place each of these personality traits that they had been working with in one of three categories: Positive (a good trait for someone to have), Negative (a bad trait for someone to have), and Neutral (doesn't really matter either way). [*Note: A factor analysis found a pattern very similar to these ratings--the two strongest factors closely resembled the set of Positive Traits and the set of Negative traits as seen in Figure 3.]

Positive Traits	Neutral Traits	Negative Traits
mature	modest	immature
honest	extrovert	phony
socially adept	socially awkward	dull
confident	combative/argu.	insecure
hard-working	pessimistic	lazy
intelligent	introvert	not intelligent
caring	optimistic	arrogant
creative	easy-going	unlikable
likable		uncaring

Figure 3: Participants' ratings of the personality traits.

If at least 80% of the students said that a certain trait was positive, then that trait was counted as positive. If at least 80% of the students said that a certain trait was negative, then that trait was counted as negative. Any trait that did not receive at least an 80% positive or 80% negative rating was given a neutral rating. These neutral traits were then thrown out--they weren't used in any of the other analyses.

The number of positive traits that was given to each author was divided over the total number of positive and negative traits given. (Again, neutral traits were ignored.) The resulting proportion--a number from 0 to 1--tells us how positively the students reacted to the persona of each author. A number above .50 means the students chose more positive traits than negative traits for that author. A number below .50 means that the students chose more negative traits than positive traits for that author.

	Author For	Author Against	
Students For	.65	.65	
Students Against	.20	.95	*(interaction = p<.005)*
All Students	.29	.86	*(p<.005)*

Table 2: Personality ratings of the hypothetical authors.

Hypothetical Authors

Overall, the hypothetical Pro author was not liked nearly as much as the hypothetical Con author (see Table 2). (Again, this was *before* reading the essays, in response to the question, "What type of person would you **expect** to argue this viewpoint?") This difference in the two ratings can be explained partly by the top two rows in Table 2, which show that the students who were against legalization gave the hypothetical anti-legalization author such a high rating and the other author such a low rating. And since most of the students were in this category of being against legalization (52% vs. 13%), this could account for the overall difference between the two ratings.

But there's also an interesting interaction here. The readers who were for legalization still liked the con author just as much as they liked the pro author--in other words, even though they were pro legalization, they did not necessarily think that someone who argued for their position would likely be a better person than someone who argued against it. On the other hand, the readers who were against legalization tended to think that someone who would argue for their position would be, in general, a much more caring and competent individual than someone who would argue against it. [*Note: Again, splitting the students up this way results in small cell sizes, which makes this interaction result suspect.]

Essay Authors

Once again, after reading the essays, the students were asked, "What do you think of the authors of these two essays? Which adjectives apply?" In general, readers liked the author of the pro-legalization essay better than they expected they would. (See Table 3). The author of the "pro" essay received a mean rating of .59, while the hypothetical pro-

legalization author had received a mean rating of only .29. But the readers who agreed that drugs should be legalized still liked both authors about the same (the difference between the two figures in the top row of Table 3 is not significant), while the students who agreed with the Con author still liked that author a lot better than the other one. So the results we saw with the hypothetical authors is pretty much replicated.

	Author For	Author Against	
Students For	.80	.66	
Students Against	.53	.92	*(interaction = $p < .05$)*
All Students	.59	.86	*(p = ns)*

Table 3: Personality ratings of the essay authors.

4. Correlations--While I don't have time to show them to you, I also threw all of these factors into a set of correlations. These correlations basically supported the notion that attitude, persona judgments, and argument evaluations are all tied up together in complex ways, with attitude being an especially strong factor. Basically, all of the factors correlated with each other, and all of the correlations were statistically significant.

Because the correlations all confounded each other, I did some partial correlations to try to tease out some individual relationships among all of these factors. The partial correlations supported the idea that the readers' evaluations of the two essays were being highly influenced by their attitudes--so this supports the ANOVA data I showed earlier. The partial correlations also suggest that the readers' ratings of the two essay authors were being influenced by their notions about what kind of people they would **expect** to take these positions--as given by their ratings of the hypothetical authors--and also by their evaluations of the arguments in the essays. The partial correlations also made it clear that their ratings of the hypothetical authors were not influencing the students' essay ratings.

Conclusion

So, what light, if any, have we shed on our two beginning questions? In terms of the first question--what kind of role do persona judgments play in getting readers to accept an argument on a controversial issue?--I would have to say that, at least in this study, persona judgments did not really affect the evaluations of the arguments at all. They correlated--but that's because both persona judgments and essay evaluations were highly influenced by the readers' attitudes. It's these *attitudes* that were influencing the essay ratings--people liked the essay best that reflected their own opinion on the issue.

As far as the second question--how do readers make persona judgments about writers when they read these kinds of arguments?--it appears that a reader's judgment of an author's persona *is* influenced by the argument which the writer makes. However, the reader's persona judgment is also partly determined by the reader's expectations of the author--that is, that someone who would take such a position would probably be stupid or arrogant or modest or caring. The important point is that both of these--the evaluation of the essay and the expectations of the personality of the person who would take such a stand--are influenced strongly by the reader's attitude on the issue. Once again, it's how the author's argumentative stance relates to the reader's *attitude* that seems to most strongly influence the reader's judgment of the writer's personality.

While the interaction results are highly tentative at this point, it is possible that there were some topic factors at work here. It could be that people who think that drugs should be legalized can imagine well-meaning and intelligent people arguing the opposite point, while at least some students who thought drugs should not be legalized could not imagine why a decent person would argue for legalization. (Some students, when asked, "Whay kind of person would argue for legalization," wrote in "Addicts" or "Pushers.")

These results point out the difficulty of trying to determine how individual readers are going to react to broad, editorial-style arguments such as these--arguments that are meant to address a large portion of the population. Ultimately, it's the attitudes, experiences, and knowledge that individual readers bring to the argument that will largely determine their reactions as they try to get a sense of, "Who are these people saying these things to me?," and "Why should I believe them?"